

Sefer



2008

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Table of Contents

<i>Coin in the Fountain, Jamie Peagler</i>	2
<i>Identity Crisis of the Century, Stefan Rogenmoser</i>	3
<i>About of Melancholy While Shelving Romance, Ashley Glenn</i>	4
<i>Cry and Crescendo, Jonathan White</i>	5
<i>There's a Candle in the Window, Ryan Warren</i>	6
<i>Remember Me, Andrew Ainsworth</i>	10
<i>Jungle Gym Wars, Stephanie Brigman</i>	12
<i>Failure of a Man, Darryl Long</i>	14
<i>Little Lady, Jamie Peagler</i>	15
<i>Visit Me in Prison, Ashley Glenn</i>	20
<i>Fairy Tale Story, Keshia Wilkins</i>	21
<i>As Madness Would Desire, Stefan Rogenmoser</i>	22
<i>Earplugs, Jonathan White</i>	23
<i>Long Lost Friend, Jamie Peagler</i>	26
<i>Out of the Welkin, Ryan Warren</i>	27
<i>To Dress a Maid in Frills, Stephanie Brigman</i>	28
<i>The Distracted, Kimberle Rosinus</i>	29
<i>The Good War, Ashley Glenn</i>	32
<i>Eveline's Great-Granddaughter, Stefan Rogenmoser</i>	33
<i>Ode to the River Mill, Andrew Ainsworth</i>	38
<i>Alexandria, Jonathan White</i>	40
<i>I Don't Like Cowboy Wallpaper, Erika Johnson</i>	43
<i>Grandma, Jamie Peagler</i>	46
<i>Prayer to Sleep, Ryan Warren</i>	48
<i>I've Lived My Life in Trailers, Ashley Glenn</i>	50

Coins in the Fountain

Jamie Peagler

I was sitting by the fountain at the mall the other day
When I met a most interesting stranger. I was looking
At the coins shimmering in the water, wondering what wishes were
Attached to them when I saw his reflection and turned around.

He was young, and he was a talker, too.
He told me what college he attended, but
I can't remember the name. He told tales of how he
Hitchhiked north last summer to fight fires and help Indians.
I don't believe him, but it could be true.

He spoke of his mother-in-law with contempt in his voice.
She didn't yet know he ran off and married her daughter.
He thumbed his shiny gold wedding band and smiled.
"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," he said confidently.

After a few more minutes of talking, a pretty girl holding
A blue Estee Lauder bag joined him. We exchanged a goodbye
That only strangers give as he went off to enjoy his honeymoon.
I looked at my own tarnished wedding band and pulled a quarter from
My pocket, and after attaching a wish of luck for the newlyweds, I
Tossed it in.

Identity Crisis of the Century

Stefan Rogenmoser

A man crawls to the seashore from a shipwreck,
He says, in a tattered and ripped three-piece suit.
For several days he stumbles through
A vast barren landscape as dry as the Sahara, he says.
Finally, upon coming home, he sees his son—
Who happens to be on the track team—
Who happens to be rubbing gravel into his head while
Running in the empty space between
Parallel parked cars out in the street.
His zany wife goes around hypnotizing cats
Because she lost her job selling
Encyclopedias to encyclopedia salesmen,
And he finds that life's just not like the old days
As he is overcome by the ennui of stockbroker's syndrome.
So he repairs his bicycle while hearing trumpets
And silly trombones from his old gramophone,
And hence he cycles himself down to the
Local theatre and prances round like a fairy
While he engages in the singing of an opera.
He comes home, and after reading three novels
In one sitting, he impulsively slams them onto the floor;
Thus he is left in a strange state of mind and
Gets up and walks down the hall to yell at his wife and
Threatens to leave again if she and the boy
Don't shape up. He is still clad in his theatre makeup and
Dress which he forgot to remove and looks quite ridiculous,
All because he only performs for
The Theatre Preservation Society, which has an entourage of
Male actors to preserve the feel of the good old days.
He removes his girlie dress and fake naughty bits, sits, tilts his head,
And listens to German composers with odd time signatures.

A Bout of Melancholy while Shelving Romance

Ashley Glenn

Nora Roberts has a shelf of her own, three in fact,
while Thackeray must be ordered like a Russian bride,
three to four business days, and
Becky Sharp will be ready to steal
your heart and any money possibly lying around.

Fiction, romance,
I shelve both, one grudgingly,
wondering which covers to place faced out—
the muscular man with a silk sheet
conveniently covering his lower body or
the rustic cowboy who wears no shirt
despite the sharp barbed wire in the background.

Copies of *The Awakening* pile on top of each other.
Sexy Beast I, II, and III shuffle from the shelf while
Frankenstein settles with the other S's
until a teacher makes it mandatory reading.

Becky Sharpe threw Johnson out the carriage window;
today, ladies do the same to her.
Oh, the tragedy
that women will never go to Pemberley
because they refuse to leave the moors with the highlander,
who will leave and return and kiss and
be tamed and walk out into the dark forest before
Darcy or Heathcliff have a chance to mount their horses.

Cry and Crescendo

Jonathan White

I noticed a face among a sea of its kind,
Unkind, uncaring; candle and candor,
I noticed it because it shone.

How much of the soul is evinced in the face,
Unconsciously, uncontrolled; clear and clairvoyant
The face, the mirror of the soul.

She noted me as I noticed her face,
Uncanny, unreal; clearly and confidently
Her face told its story.

But her eyes called the bluff,
Unquiet, unconscious; cry and crescendo,
Her eyes screamed at me.

There's A Candle In the Window

Ryan Warren

I think we are not so far from home anymore. Once we were, perhaps, or at least it seemed that way. Once we were trying to find it, and our footprints kept getting lost as we crackled through the snow, only to have them covered up again by its heavy falling. I can still feel it, sometimes, when I'm walking down the sidewalk, when the snow's still falling, and it's that time of day when it's just light enough to see and your feet crackle but the footprints are covered back up again and no one can ever find you. Which is good unless you want to retrace your steps. Then that process is impossible. I want us to be clear about that upfront. Where I am, where I came from—I'm not so sure. I'm not even sure I came. I know I am here, wherever that is, and I think that somewhere, just beyond the next few lampposts, is home, waiting for me.

When Em and I went out to play with Maggie, we treated her like a goddess. We held hands, running through the open fields nearby into the forest to welcome winter in its celestial glory. Em would shake the trees and make the snowdrifts fall onto our heads, which was funny because Maggie tried to copy her, and being too little, could not make most of the trees even budge. We lay in the dense white powder, falling into it like a bed that molded to our bodies. The snow melted beneath our body heat. We stood up to behold the outlines of ourselves in the forest's pearl floor. The snow started again, and the shapes were gone, covering the places in which our bodies, for that brief moment, had existed.

Once we found a deer blind in a patch of trees in the middle of the field. Maggie wondered what this was for. Em and I looked at each other, and I told Maggie it was a fort in which the kids played. I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth about animal killing. It just didn't seem right. The snow covered most things, so it wasn't as if she could figure out what it was anyway. She had never seen one before. Maggie, Em and I climbed up the ladder to the stand in the top of the tree and looked out. The fields were pretty vast, but on one side the forest where we had come from grew out and swept up the field in places, converting it to part of the forest. The snow covered all, the dead grass, the trees—it was all white. The sun's golden glow sparkled off the tree limbs, and a whiff of the smooth breeze got us drunk on frosty maple. To the other direction the sun was nearing the earth, about to collide with our linear perspective, like a candle guiding us towards the future. Em and I safely got Maggie down, and I carried her back, sleeping in my arms like a newborn.

One day we went out, and it was so cold I could tell without looking at them that my hands were freezing. My veins were shriveling between my bones, and as I took Em's hand, I could feel it was as well. Strangely, Maggie

did not have gloves on, and her hands were warmest of all, which, while still reddened from the cold, somehow managed to melt all the snow she touched. We walked again through the forest and found, in an open area, a pond that was frozen over. I found some rocks to throw into it, and none of them broke the surface ice, so slowly I stepped onto the edge and walked carefully across it. It was snowing lightly, and the ice was gathering a light layer of it on top. It seemed thick enough, so I motioned for Em and Maggie to come on towards me. They did so, albeit in a somewhat more awkward manner than I had managed, and we sort of shimmy-skated around the frozen pond. We made lines in the ice and snow where we didn't pick up our feet one minute, then the next we'd come around to a place near where we'd just left off to find the last path voided over with snow, and we had to create a new one.

We left the ice to wander further into the forest. We were almost climbing now, up some sort of hill. The sun shone brighter through the thinner canopy ceiling as we climbed, and we noticed the snow beginning to be pierced by rocks breaking through the floor of it, into the air. Eventually these led out to formations of cliff-like rock towers, set apart from the actual trees and forest itself by several hundred feet. Without climbing the ledges themselves, we found ourselves looking out onto ravines of white pearly gates of splendid majesty, lined from the direct drop below to the snow-covered high mountains in the distance. The sun beamed from on high and made the earth radiate with an angelic glow.

It was hard to tear ourselves away from the view, but we turned to head back through the forest. Nearing the trees, suddenly Maggie released her grip on our hands and ran back toward the rocks. Em called after her, curious, but Maggie gave no sign of recognition to her voice. Instead, she went to the highest rock tower, looked up towards the sun, and climbed. Em and I sprinted towards her, but she was nimble as a monkey, scaling the tower. My hands were too big to get even the slightest grip on a niche in the sides of it, and Em's hands were too shaky to maintain grip on the slippery wall. We called to Maggie, but she did not turn to us. Instead, she climbed. The top of that tower must have measured near ninety feet. She reached the top and knelt, at first, to catch her breath. Then she stood. She was still looking up at the sun. Then she looked at the view of the land below, then back up. The snow was raining down upon us, and chunks cascaded down the tower where Maggie had climbed. We could barely see her at the top through the white sheets covering the air around us, and in a second we realized we could not see her. She fell.

Her body went over the opposite side, toward the ravine, and we rushed to the edge but couldn't see as far as to make out her form or where it had gone. We ran in about every direction looking for some way to get down there. Em was in tears; I don't know how she could see through the streams of it down her face that matted her hair to her eyes. Somehow she ended up finding an area with just enough friction for us to get grips on our feet without plunging down into the pit.

We descended into the ravine, the walls of the cliff nearly frozen

over. I could still see the moss on parts of the crags, kept perpetually green beneath the icy surface. My hands and Em's were numb, and so it was my nose that first caught the scent of blood. I put one hand in front of my face and noted little slices in the fingers from grasping the side of the cliff. The snow kept pelting us even heavier, and on one ledge my hand gripped I felt something soft under it. It scared me, and as I pulled my hand back from it a group of round bluish objects rolled over the side of the cliff and into the ravine. I reached back to see what I had touched and pulled out a nest that had been covered with snow and ice. Eventually we got to the bottom, or at least to some other lateral plane beneath the upper level of the chasm, and it was like being in the middle of a cloud. Em and I could barely see each other from nearly three feet away.

We carefully felt around and moved in the direction the body had fallen or at least the direction of the stone tower from which Maggie had fallen. We moved slowly, avoiding large patches of ice that we nearly fell on more than once. After about half an hour of meandering and searching around the area, Em stumbled and fell over a protruding trunk frozen from the ground up like a stalagmite. Her face rested on the ground, and she got up and looked at me with a face that seemed as though she had met the devil. She swallowed hard and pointed at the ground.

The drops of blood were not clearly visible at first, at least from where I was standing, and I had to put my head down almost to the surface to see the red specks. They traced a line that was being wiped out by the constantly falling snow in the misty haze around Em and me but the light patch of ground that I could tell something had been was empty. Maggie's body was not there. We searched around the area more. The place where we had found blood was freezing, the blood becoming ruby gems inside the iced-over chasm floor. Em cried and cried, but what could I do? Maggie's body was gone.

I looked out the window of the Medical Center at the snow falling. The weather report said a blizzard was on the way. Still, the sun managed to find its way through the cloud to gleam light onto our feeble world. Too bad it isn't warm enough to melt the snow this time of year. I looked down at the desk under the television at the cards and ribbons, pink and yellow, and the dolls still in their boxes. I didn't know yet if we would return them. I turned around to glance at Em, lying in the bed, alone. She was sleeping now. The doctor would send us home in the morning, I hoped.

Home. I wonder if that's where Maggie was going. I'd like to think so. I picture her walking through the snow. She's walking home right now. It's dark and the snow's falling so she can't see where she's come from, but that keeps her from fearing the past. Nothing can find her, and nothing is in her way as the glowing light in the window beckons her come home. In reality I think she was never far from home. It was always in the back of her head, that light, that glow, that calling.

I took out a used tissue from my pocket and wiped my eyes. Out the window the snow fell in front of the setting sun. Its glow penetrated but did not

overcome it. I could see the light in the distance, but I knew it was out of my reach. I hope to go home someday. I hope to go home and meet Maggie. God, I miss her. God. I want to go home. I like to think that home is right around the corner. Right around the next block. I think none of us are so far from home anymore. Someday the fire will be kindled, and the light will glow and beckon us come home.

I sank to my knees before the window as the sun drowned beneath the horizon and the encroaching darkness. The rivers in my head flooded onto my face, and I tried to cover it up but I couldn't. I looked through my wet face at the snow coming down outside, showing in the streetlights. I wept for the coming of dawn. I wept for home, and I prayed to God that it was right around the corner.

Remember Me

Andrew Ainsworth

When I am gone,
and all is quiet in the air—
the space my words once filled,
keeping you company,
like the low-set volume
of your television late at night—
and you're alone.
Remember.

Remember the sound
of my mellow voice.
The glint in my eyes—bright,
reflecting the clutter around us;
books on the floor,
your scattered magazines,
our dating-column lives—
and at their center, you
the way you looked to me—
lovely as a breath-warm breeze
that kisses my face.

As I step out, leaving you,
remember;
despite all our problems.
Though years have
placed a cork on
our sweet bouquet,
I will always be able
to recall the color,
the fragrance,
and that subtle taste on my tongue;
like choice sampled wine.

Keep in mind, my dear,

that on the whole,
the aged, bitter liquid—all its substance,
though more outstanding
than the aftertaste—
was worth the taste.

It was all justified
for memory's sake.
Almost all things are worth that pain
so that reflection can decipher
the truth of what was, is, and will be.

Jungle Gym Wars

Stephanie Brigman

Boys had cooties
Or so everyone said. We felt it was time
To even the odds. "Girls rule and boys drool" was
The motto, the playground our fortress to protect.
Twists and turns of mass metal
Stood erect as we gathered our troops for attack.
Opposing forces filtered in
On every side. "Don't let 'em through!" we cried.
Into the tunnel, an enemy trenched forward,
But we were most underestimated.
Adrenaline filled our veins as forceful
Kicks were delivered
To the backs of our legs.
The wall stood fast as caps
Sailed to the land below. The siege was over.
The fortress was ours, and
Boys still had cooties.

Standing here, five years past, boys
Hold our hands as we meander down
The halls. No longer
Are there fortresses to protect,
But boundaries and borders,
School dances and dating.
Awkward pauses of
Conversation, stolen kisses, and
Flirtatious giggles encumber our
appearance, and I sigh.
Here he comes now.
Snaggle teeth and freckles have long since
Disappeared, but memories of past battles
Continue to linger. Butterflies swarm
Within me, and heat rises
To my face. Fortresses begin to fade,

And my thoughts drift carelessly
As if on the Ashley River.
Maybe boys don't have cooties after all.

Failure of a Man

Darry Long

Ah, life. . . the possibilities of love can
Run dry like a man at the end of a long mourn,
Only to crack a smile
Looking down at his son, a newborn.

Fittingly enough, the man drove his woman away, and now
Feeling feeble, helpless, it seems he's at wits end.
He looks into his newborn sons' eyes and says, "My
Heart I gave away, was broken, now it no longer mends."

Unable to soothe his thoughts and memories,
He sought to find a replacement, a new mother.
Searching it seemed took forever, in and out,
And until he realized that there was none better.

The pain and agony of losing that one
Hurts the soul in ways other souls cannot see.
Trying to find where she may have gone,
He wonders, "Why does this always happen to me?"

Long ago, it seemed they were ageless,
Vibrant, fruitful young adults with hopes and dreams
Of all the stars in the sky they chose the dimmest.
Why you ask? Because it had room to grow wings.

Searching became useless to him, so he rested one day, a
Knock on his door and he began to reach with his hand.
A woman spoke four words, "Failure of a Man",
Turned and withered away never again to be seen.

A Little Lady

Jamie Peagler

I was in Mrs. Clark's sixth grade science class on a Tuesday making molecules out of marshmallows and toothpicks when our guidance counselor, Mrs. Washington, walked into the classroom. After some hushed talk between Mrs. Clark and Mrs. Washington, Mrs. Washington walked up to me and quietly asked me to come to the office with her. As we walked to the office together, I looked at the art work displayed on the walls by the other students at Mercer Middle School, not wanting to face the fact that I may have been in trouble. On Monday, I blacked Casey Anderson's eye after he told me that I hit like a girl. While it's true that I am a girl, I was convinced I hit better than any boy in my school, Casey Anderson included. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I had cold-cocked him in his right eye. I told him I would hit the other one if he told on me, but apparently, I hadn't scared him enough, and now here I was with Mrs. Washington to go see Mr. Brisbon, our principal. I was already thinking about my alibi when we walked into the office.

When I walked inside, I found that things were worse than I thought. Along with Mr. Brisbon, Chief Tucker of the Mercer police force was waiting to see me. With knots in my stomach, I sat down at Chief Tucker's invitation. He got on his knees in front of me so he was eye level with me. I looked at his thick mustache, not wanting to look him in the eye. If he was here about Casey, then he surely had told my daddy about it by now.

"Sweetheart, there's something I have to tell you, something that ain't going to be easy for you to hear." Chief Tucker began after clearing his throat. Something in my eleven year old mind told me this wasn't about Casey's black eye at all. I didn't say a word, so he continued.

"Honey, your daddy's gone."

"Gone where? Did he have to go to Mobile for Mr. Earl today?"

"No, Honey. He was killed in an accident today." I couldn't believe what I was hearing, and my mind couldn't comprehend that Daddy would not be picking me up from Miss Margie's tonight, and that I would never get a chance to kiss his bearded cheeks again. I felt the hot tears running down my face unable to say anything. I wanted to scream, but no sound would come out of my mouth. I remember Chief Tucker telling me that a car had fallen on him while he was at work, killing him instantly, and that he would take me to my home to gather some clothes before going to Miss Margie's for the night. Mrs. Washington hugged me and talked to me for a while about grief, but I didn't hear a word she said.

After she was done, Chief Tucker placed me in the back of his cruiser and took me home where Miss Margie was waiting. She met us outside

and threw her arms around me and told me how sorry she was. I remember burying my face into her shoulder and crying for what felt like eternity. After I finally managed to stop crying, she led me inside the single wide trailer I shared with Daddy. It smelled like Old Spice, and the frying pan where Daddy had cooked me scrambled eggs that morning was still sitting on the stove. I tried not to look around for fear I would start crying again, so I made my way to the room I had called my own since I was an infant. My mama died while giving birth to me, and after that, Daddy sold the house he and Mama lived in and bought a two bedroom single-wide trailer. Since I was just a baby when we moved there, he painted the walls of my room a color that wasn't quite peach and wasn't quite pink. As I grew older, those peach-pink walls were covered with posters of Mike Schmidt of Phillies fame, and the shelves that once held the doll collection my mama owned when she was a child now held various rocks I had found along with my first home run baseball, fishing lures, and a hodge-podge of other tomboy things.

I packed my little brown suitcase with clothes and other necessary things, but I packed light. For some reason, I thought I would be coming home later to stay, even if Daddy wasn't there. When I was done, Miss Margie was outside talking to Chief Tucker, so I went into Daddy's room at the other end of the trailer. The smell of Old Spice was strongest in this room. The walls were supposed to be white, but they were a dingy color from all of Daddy's years of smoking. There were pictures on the wall of Mama and me, but not together, since she didn't live long enough to take a picture with me. One photograph had been hung recently. I didn't notice it yesterday, so Daddy must have hung it up either the night before or that morning before he left for work. It was a picture of Daddy and me on my eleventh birthday the previous December. I pulled it off the wall and climbed into Daddy's bed and looked at the picture. Looking at it brought back memories, and I thought back to that day. All my life I had been a little tomboy, and I never wore a dress, not even to church when we visited at Christmas and Easter. I was perfectly happy wearing either my overalls or my blue jeans, climbing trees, and besting boys at everything from baseball to playground scuffles. I suppose I became that way because it was just Daddy and me. By the time I turned eleven, Daddy kept telling me it was time to stop being such a little tomboy and start acting like a little lady. Many conversations went something like this:

"Charlotte, climb down outta that tree and get in here. You've got to be at Margie's in ten minutes."

"I don't want to go to Miss Margie's, Daddy, and it's Charlie, not Charlotte. Why you calling me Charlotte all of a sudden?" I hated to be called by my given name, and much preferred to be called by my nickname.

"Because it's time for you to act like a lady! Now get in here so I can take you to Margie's before I climb up there and get you." I had no desire for Daddy to climb up the tree and get me. He didn't get mad often, but when he did, you had to run. Daddy believed in the adage "Spare the rod, spoil the child," and while I didn't get very many spankings, I got them nonetheless.

Daddy worked as a mechanic at Lewis Garage, which means he

worked a lot for a little money. Since he was still working when I got out of school, and especially when I was out of school, he made arrangements for me to go to Miss Margie's while he was working. Miss Margie was a pretty single lady who lived a couple of blocks away from Daddy and me. While she and Daddy never really went out on what is considered a date, we ate supper with her at least two nights a week. Since Daddy couldn't afford to pay her much, she agreed to let him pay her what he could and make up for the rest by keeping her grass cut as it was needed. When Daddy had to work late, she cooked supper for us. She said it wasn't right for a little girl to eat supper at eight o'clock at night, so she'd feed me supper and keep a plate for herself and Daddy in the microwave until he came in. Her cooking wasn't too bad, and Daddy always complimented her on it, but I thought he was just being polite and that he really liked my grilled cheese sandwiches with Duke's mayonnaise and extra cheese better than her dinner of friend chicken, rice and gravy, and cherry pie any day.

When my eleventh birthday rolled around, I was sure Daddy had gotten me the Louisville Slugger I had begged him for. Baseball didn't start until March, but I knew I could practice before then. Since Daddy had to be at work really early that morning, he told me I could have my present that night. I waited all day for it, and I was bursting with excitement when he pulled into Miss Margie's yard in his blue Ford Ranger pickup truck. I watched him from the window as he climbed out with a brightly wrapped package that didn't look like a bat. Trying to hide my disappointment, I ran outside to him to tell him hello. He swooped me up in his arms and sang Happy Birthday to me, which made me forget for just a minute how disappointed I was. Miss Margie had told me one that if someone gives you something you don't like, you should act like you do and thank them anyway. I was determined to do that, as I knew I wouldn't like anything other than a Louisville Slugger. Once inside, Daddy handed Miss Margie a Bi-Lo box containing my birthday cake and a pack of candles. The cake was pink and white and said "Happy 11th Birthday, Charlie!" I was glad he didn't put "Charlotte" on it.

"Can I have the rose, Daddy?" I asked him.

"Of course you can, baby. It's your birthday. You can do whatever you want."

Just before I blew the candles out, Miss Margie took a picture of Daddy and me with my cake. After the three of us got a slice, Daddy handed me my present. The wrapping was purple and green with streaks of silver, and there was a big green bow on top. I tore through the wrap and ripped open the large white box. What I found inside was not a Louisville Slugger, but I smiled to try and hide my disappointment. Inside, there was a lavender dress with white trim and a small straw hat with lavender ribbons cascading from behind it. As I said before, I didn't wear dresses, and even though I smiled and thanked Daddy anyway, I was determined never to wear it. I didn't like the fact that Daddy was trying to make me into a lady when I didn't want to be, and I was determined that he wasn't going to get the best of me. Through January and

February, he kept asking to see me in my dress and hat, but I kept finding excuse after excuse not to wear it. Even when we went to Miss Margie's sister's wedding, I wouldn't wear it, not even for a minute. I began to cry again as I held my picture in my hand. All Daddy had wanted was for me to act like a lady. Other than that, he asked so little of me, and I was too selfish to wear that stupid dress for five minutes. Miss Margie came in Daddy's room and found me sobbing into his pillow.

"Come on now, sweetheart. We've got to go. It's going to be all right, just hold on to me. Everything is going to be ok." I don't know how she managed it, but she carried me to her car. I was almost as tall as she was, so I don't imagine it was easy for her.

The next three days were a blur. Miss Margie made all the arrangements for Daddy's funeral using the money from his life insurance policy, and on Thursday, Daddy's sitting up was at the funeral home. I didn't go into the viewing room. I didn't want to see Daddy like that, and I was afraid I would cry if I did. Several people hugged me and told me what a brave girl I was, and Miss Margie came out several times to ask me if I was sure I didn't want to go see Daddy. I told her I was sure and managed to keep from crying the whole night.

His funeral was a different story. Daddy's casket was already at the front of the church when we arrived, and I was all right until the funeral began. When the pall bearers began closing the lid of the casket on Daddy, it just didn't seem right to me that he should be in there. I sobbed all through the funeral with my head in Miss Margie's lap, and I don't even remember a thing the preacher said or the songs that were sung for him.

By the next Monday, Miss Margie woke me up and told me to get dressed. This was the day I had been dreading. Since both Mama and Daddy were gone, that meant I was an orphan and currently had no one to take me in. Miss Margie wanted to take me, but the social worker who came to her house said she would have to be subjected to a background check and such before she could gain custody of me. Until then, I was a ward of the state of Alabama. After getting dressed, I sat on Miss Margie's porch swing with my suitcase containing my clothes and a few mementos of Daddy: his and Mama's wedding album, my birthday picture, his wallet, and his almost empty bottle of Old Spice. There wasn't a cloud in the sky that March day when Alabama Child Services came to take me to a house where I didn't know anyone, and the walls of my room would not be peach-pink. I wasn't even certain there would be a room to call my own, but there was one thing I did know. Wherever they took me, my daddy would not be there. I fought back tears as Miss Margie came outside to sit beside me. She put her arm around me and pulled me close.

"You look as pretty as a picture, Sugar." When I didn't respond, she smoothed down the skirt of my flower covered lavender dress and tucked a few stray wisps of my braid under my straw hat with lavender ribbons. I'd picked out my outfit that morning hoping that Daddy could see me wearing it from Heaven and wishing all the while he could have seen me in it when he was

alive. I would have put that dress on a hundred times for him if I had known he would be dead within three months of buying it for me. Miss Margie gently took my chin and turned my face toward hers.

"Don't be afraid, Charlotte. I'm going to do everything I can to gain custody of you. There's a lot of red tape I have to cut through before I can, though. If I can help it, you won't be in foster care long."

"But I want my daddy! I don't want to live with anyone else." The tears I had been fighting back spilled uncontrollably over my face. I buried my face in Miss Margie's shoulder, so I didn't see the white Ford pull into the driveway.

"Come on, Honey, you've got to be strong now. It's time to go." She wiped my face with a tissue, and led me by the hand to the large woman with graying hair getting out of the car. I missed the introductions exchanged between the large woman and Miss Margie, maybe because I didn't care to know the woman's name. She was taking me away from my home. She buckled me into the backseat of her car, and Miss Margie waved goodbye. There was silence in the car until we pulled off onto the highway.

"Your name is Charlotte, isn't it?" the large woman asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's a very pretty name, Charlotte." I folded my hands in my lap and looked out at Mercer passing by, not wanting to say anything else. My stomach was in knots, and I was afraid I'd make a terrible mess in the backseat of that white Ford if I tried to speak.

"Do you have a nickname, Charlotte?"

"Just Charlotte."

"Well, that's a pretty name for a pretty little lady." The large woman drove on not realizing she was passing on through my town, my life, as we left Mercer behind. I prayed I'd be back here soon, and I clung to Miss Margie's promise that I would be. Besides the contents of my little suitcase, it was all I had left.

Visit Me in Prison

Ashley Glenn

If I should key the black Mercedes
riding ahead, passing cigarette butts out the window
to drop to the asphalt, you will be
the first I'll call, the first to know
I dove into the deep end,
not wanting to swim or be saved, only wanting
to taste a bit of justice as I strangle the white man's
neck and walk away with
his cheap aftershave rubbed into my palms.

Fairytale Story

Keshia Wilkins

Fill the halls with light and cover the windows with night stars.
Take me away to a place of blissful dreaming
Where every golden pool of idyllic poetry is told and
Brought to life with every magical kiss and smile.

Lead me to a that place where idealism becomes realism,
Where every pen drop of ink brings pleasure to each page
That flows past me like the glistening of a lake as the sun sets.
Bring me that tranquility of autumn's breeze as the leaves
Fall and fall all around me.

Create that warm and snug feeling inside
When my finger scrolls across each page.
Dip me in the fountain of youth and
Turn back time to that unparalleled universe of times to come.

If only this dream, this state of radiant beauty could last.
Oh, but wait.
Beauty of this magnitude will never go away;
Even when my pen stops flowing and the words stop coming,
The magic is there, waiting, bubbling with pure excitement
When these hands dip into that everlasting stream
Of enchanting splendor.

As Madness Would Desire

StefanRogenmoser

I set my alarm for 2 a.m. so that I can get up,
Set my alarm for 6 a.m., and go back to sleep.
When it wakes me at 6 I make coffee, which I then pour onto my hair.
This is the best way to start the second part of my day.
I call my landline from my mobile just to make sure to tell myself
To hurry, because I needn't be late. I check the caller I.D.
 making sure it's really me
And not some stupid jerk trying to wake me at this hour.
I can wake myself perfectly well.
I look into the looking glass making sure that my coffee cowlick is
 curved just right.
If it isn't right I can't leave until it is.
I put my shoes on the wrong feet because it feels better that way.
Funny how shoes are. I tie the laces inside the tongue.
It would look silly otherwise, and I can't stand looking silly.
I put on my hat, go out the door, hop overtop the fence,
Cross the street, then go to the riverbank.
It is here that I take off my shoes, roll up my trousers,
And stick my feet into the river because it is freezing cold
And gives me the sensation I need to make it through another day.
I put my hands in my shoes and make sure the shoes are flat on the
Concrete riverbank. If the shoes aren't flat on the bank, the fish
Will think I'm not here and won't bother to eat my feet. I need my feet.
I lift myself up again with my cane and hobble down the gravel path.
The little sparrow says hello as I begin my jabber-walk;
One must always get his exercise. It clears the mind and
 keeps one sane.

Earplugs

Jonathan White

*Man is in a constant attempt to flee reality
by whatever means he may contrive.*

It must have begun that summer after I lost my job as a tech writer. It was pretty hard to find a job in those days, so I went back to doing landscape maintenance. It was demeaning as a man in my late twenties to return to that job which had occupied my teenage summers, but I had a wife and a kid on the way, so I needed to bring in some sort of money while I looked for another job. The thing is, I didn't really look. When I got home after landscaping all day, I was too worn out to do anything. I usually just sat and read, or sat and watched television, or just sat. When dinner was ready I ate it and then went to bed. I had forgotten the oppressive heat, the long hours, the sweat in your eyes, the grit and dirt that worked its way into every crease in your body, and the noise all the equipment makes. Hearing protection is vital, so I soon purchased a nice pair of yellow earplugs on a blue plastic string. They provided solace from the mowers, the blowers, the edgers, everything. The summer progressed like they always do. It got hotter and hotter up until about the end of July and then it started to cool off, cool being a relative term—I still found myself sweating in the shade.

On the Fourth of July, my wife doubled over in pain in front of the potato salad that was sitting on the picnic table in our back yard, and we knew it was time. We drove to the hospital, and that night our daughter was born. We brought her home the next day. That's when I learned that babies are designed to cry when you want to sleep, and when they finally sleep, you almost cry. My job trudged on day after day, and my wife continually hounded me about finding a new one. She didn't like the effect this one was having on me. I didn't care much for it either, but then again I was too tired to care about anything. One day at work I left my earplugs in during lunch. I saw the other guys looking and laughing, talking about me among themselves; but I couldn't hear them. I liked it. I could hear myself breathing. I could hear my own heartbeat if I was still enough. I could hear myself chewing my sandwich, my jaw popping every few chews. I could hear the carbonation of my Dr. Pepper popping and fizzing as it slid down my throat. I could hear myself think.

We got back to work, and finally the day was over, and I took out my earplugs on the ride home. I heard the newscaster talking about the economy and how it's not looking good for employment. I heard him talk about all the messes in foreign affairs. I heard experts offer their professional opinions on how to fix the nation. I turned to another station and listened to a song. Then I turned it to another and another and another and all the songs sounded the same. Frustrated, I switched off the radio and was satisfied for a moment.

Then I noticed the sound my tires were making on the rough asphalt beneath them. I heard the slight knocking noise my engine had been making for a few months now. I heard other peoples' cars and their exhausts and their tires, some of their radios if they were turned up enough. I heard their horns blaring when they felt the need to reprimand another driver. I turned the radio back on and settled on the oldies station for the rest of the ride home.

I pulled into the driveway and turned off the car and just sat there for a moment. Through my metal atmosphere I heard the muffled sounds of kids playing hockey in the street, their yells and their slapshots. I opened the door, and the sound got so loud that I shut the door quickly. Feeling ridiculous, I opened the door again and got out only to have a small but heavy plastic ball whiz by my head, missing by only a few inches.

"Sorry mister!" the boy cried as he skated past me to the grab the ball that had terminated flight against the brick exterior of my house.

"Just be more careful" I think I said as he headed back to the road. But he didn't hear me. I walked inside, and the baby was crying. My wife was frustrated and began in on me with the job talk as soon as I crossed the threshold. I listened to her for as long as I could, but between her voice and the baby's crying and the kitchen radio, I had to get away, so I went into my room and closed the door. As I walked away from my wife, she only got louder. I hardly slept that night, partly because the couch is far less comfortable than my bed, but mostly because the baby would not stop screaming. I woke up unrested, and my wife came and offered her red-eyed apology. I accepted and went to work. That day I wore my earplugs for the entire work day. I felt so alone, so separated. It was tremendous. I heard my footfall everywhere I walked. I noted the different sound my feet made on grass and pavement and dirt, and the difference made by speed. The world was muffled and distant, and I heard myself in clear audio.

The days went on like this for some time, probably until late October. I would come home, sit, eat dinner, have the same job conversation with my wife, and then go to bed. Wake up, do it again, only a little more tired because the baby hated sleeping.

One day in the end of October I did not remove my earplugs in the driveway as normal. I didn't even take them off in the doorway. I saw my wife come over and hug me. She said something, but I couldn't hear her over the sound of my breathing and movement. By her expression, I assumed it was a question, but I did not answer. She looked confused and then agitated. She asked again but more loudly this time. Something about dinner or the baby, I'm not sure. She threw up her hands and walked away. I was left to myself. I relished dinner that night. Instead of our normal conversation, I heard my molars grinding chicken breast and rice. I heard water slide down my throat, my jaw popping, my breathing, my thoughts. In bed that night my wife looked at me and whispered something and smiled. I saw her lips move, but I did not hear. She ran her hand up the side of my torso and touched my face. I smiled a little and then turned over and went to sleep. I did not hear the baby that night. I slept so well that I was a bit upset to find myself awake in the morning.

The fall days turned to winter days, and I wore my earplugs all the time. I lost my job because my supervisor was irritated that I would not remove them when he spoke. My wife went to her mother's and took our child. I'll never understand her. I was so happy with her.

Long Lost Friend

Jamie Peagler

I remembered you the other day.
I haven't seen you since
Your father died and your mother
Moved you away. For a while,
I had forgotten you but seeing
Children playing baseball in a cornfield
Helped me remember.

I remember when we were children
Using weathered wicker lawn furniture
For bases. You'd toss your unruly
Black hair over your shoulder and
Slide your favorite Chipper Jones card from
The pocket of your overalls as if
Just looking at him would improve your swing.
It rarely ever did.

Many years have passed since we were
Children playing baseball. I wonder
If you remember those care-free
Summer days. Have you forgotten me
As I almost did you? Or do seeing
Children playing baseball in a cornfield
Help you remember?

Out of the Welkin

Ryan Warren

'I am the sea; hark, how her sighs do blow!
She is the weeping welkin, I the earth:
Then must my sea be moved with her sighs;
Then must my earth with her continual tears
Become a deluge, overflow'd and drown'd.' (*Titus Andronicus*)

Floods of light from everlasting
Shores through dismal holes
Of azure cropped in circles—
Black slits in the iris.

Mirror into spheres a shaft of
What could be behind curtains
Torn when veils are shred—
Cataracts turned grey.

Drip through the abyss above
Enshrined the glows are
Blinking in the claps of—
Falling beams of night.

Together globes collapsed within
Tarnished glass subjected
To an onslaught brought—
Treachery and salt.

Moaning of the martyred tossed
Onto banks empty of a
Grace subjected to—
Rolling white blankets.

Coiling across revoked sunshine
Green dewed red with a
Final cry out of simple—
Fallen flooding night.

To Dress a Maid in Frills

Stephanie Brigman

Hardly a sight to dress,
A maid in frills of squash yellow, when itching
And gasping are tradition. Puffed sleeves rise
Like marshmallows as bell-like gowns sway
With the march—each breath becoming
Minimized with each step. Statued smiles conform
To the radiance of angelic lace,
A sallow comparison to brilliance.
Heels deny mercy while stays vacuum
The remnants of leftover lunch. Freedom's odds are
Against my breathing.
The bells begin, then the happy ending;
Such are the days of a squash maid.

Distracted

KimberleRosinus

I enter my therapist's office prepared to feel better when I notice the rock on the hand of the ditz next to me. It was huge to say the least. My word-of-the-day calendar would suggest *ostentatious* or *odious* perhaps. Maybe another equally helpful word that begins with an "o."

My brother gave me this word-of-the-day calendar for my birthday four months ago. I like to take the opportunity to substitute my new and entirely inappropriate words in daily conversation. Like when I saw someone fall the other day. I mean fall, as in flat on his face. A big man, about six-four, a burly type with curly brown hairs on his arms that made him look like a big hairy idiot. His giant feet caught the edge of the sidewalk, and he did a face-plant into the cement. I just couldn't help myself. I laughed, and I laughed a lot. Wiping my eyes of the tears that can only come from that kind of amusement, I turned to my friend and said, "Aw man! That was sooo *ostentatious*!" Her face was three parts pity and one part confusion as she saw the man now surrounded by concerned citizens. "Yeah," she agreed. "Soo *offentatious*." Bless that little word-of-the-day calendar.

Anyway, back to this chunk of precious stone and the woman it weighs down. She carries on her shoulder a leather bag with a gleaming, splendid emblem that proudly shouts "PRADA!" Her tiny left hand, protected by this cannonball of a diamond, curls possessively over the shoulder straps of this bag. She tenses up and casts me a glance of suspicion as I shift in my seat. Her knuckles tighten on the straps as though I were now plotting to make a run for her PRADA! bag.

She was a tiny little thing, but I decide I can take her. I actually have muscles now. I've had them since I started kung-fu at the behest of my therapist. She said that I needed an outlet for my excited energy. I found it interesting that my therapist would command such an exercise. Her walls are covered in paintings that contained hidden peace signs, and she wears free-flowing floor length skirts at every appointment. I'm also pretty sure that she keeps granola bars and mineral water in the mini-fridge next to the bright yellow couch that I nap on during our appointments. I've had suspicions since day one that she was a hippie. Nothing wrong with hippies, just funny that she told me I needed to go out and beat up people is all.

I could take the PRADA! woman, one-on-one, under the supervision of my Sifu. But something told me that here in the waiting room she would beat the ever-living crap out of me. One properly executed blow with that ring-hand of hers would result in the loss of an eye, several teeth or even a fatality. I'm thinking Mortal Kombat. She would draw a katana from the depths of her PRADA! bag and execute my death blow. A booming voice would announce FATALITY! And she would strike some warrior pose as my body and head

twitched separately on the floor.

Growing up, my mom never made much fuss about the violence in video games or movies. Not like some parents I knew. She would only tell us to turn it down enough so she could watch *Young and the Restless* and drink her scotch or gin in peace. I hate the stuff. Scotch tastes like bad cough syrup, and gin tastes like my grandmother's hairspray. I would get a taste every time I went to visit the woman. My face would be smashed into her freshly curled hair, and I would carry that taste on my lips for hours after.

I bet this woman sitting next to me drinks fine aged wines at fancy restaurants with fancy French names that would sound absurd in the English language. Something like "Le Tube Sock" or "Fancy Cheese Castle." I never bothered to learn a language, but I bet they would sound great in French. She is wearing red lipstick, too. That kind of red that makes me look like I'm trying way too hard and always comes off on my teeth. On her, this Goddess of PRADA! there could be no other color. She also has on these glasses, the dark-tinted huge ones. Huge, like her ring. The kind of glasses that always make girls look like they are waiting for their mother ship to take them back to Planet Uvula or something. She is wearing them indoors, too. It's bright in the office, but it hardly warrants the protection of that oversized fashion accessory. The room is painted minty green with cheap pastel prints of the seaside framed on the wall. The furniture is a little worn, and it makes me wonder where all of our money goes. I wonder what kind of car my therapist drives. My sunglasses, however, are perched safely on top of my head. I constantly misplace these things. I've asked people at work if they've seen a pair of aviators, and their perfect poker faces never betrayed the fact that they still resided on top of my head.

She's nicely dressed too. Grey slacks and a light purple sweater with a delicate chain of silver clinging to her neck. My dad would say she is too skinny. He would always comment on how he liked meat on his women and would proceed to grab a handful of my mother. "At least someone got what they wanted in this marriage!" she would snort in reply.

I am wearing sandals, scrub pants, and a university t-shirt, but my parents really have a good marriage. There's a lot of repartee, if you will. Unless you are my therapist. She is convinced that some how my parents are to blame for my problems. I told her once, just to see the look on her face, that she had no idea what was wrong with me, and she should go back to the commune with the other hippies. Just to see what would happen. She didn't even flinch. She responded in the same way she responded to everything else. Her pen would momentarily lift from the paper, and her face would furrow in well-imitated concern. Then she would say, "And how does that make you feel?"

"How does it make me feel? It makes me feel that you got your PhD online and that I am paying you way too much money. Hippie!"

She's also convinced that the suicide of my grandfather is to blame for my easily being distracted. I want to know how psychology works so I too can explain the jump from ADD to a grandfather's suicide six years before I was even born.

That reminds me of my first visit to this place and filling out the health

survey. A part of it asked if the patient has a history of committing suicide. I laughed out loud, and everyone else in the waiting room shot me a look that said, “*She sure as hell belongs here.*” I read the sheet again when I realized the question had asked if there was a family history of committing suicide. Everyone there was right. I definitely belonged in therapy.

I wonder if Miss PRADA! has a history of committing suicide. She looked sad, but again, we all were. We are all in therapy for crying out loud. Except me, of course, usually sitting here with a stupid grin on her face, quietly chattering to herself, I think we were all a bunch of depressed people. I actually ended up going to therapy because of these racing thoughts I would get at night. *Stains on the carpet... The state of literacy in inner-city schools... Why does pizza always burn the top of my mouth, yet I continue eating it? Haven't I learned my lesson? Do penguins really mate for life, or is that just a myth?* *The senior partner at my firm and his hideous paisley-print shirts... Canceling gym memberships... Remember to buy flour in case you want to make cookies... Murder rates in Appalachia...* Everything. If it is a thought, my mind will entertain it. “Come on,” my brain says, “come to the party. A lot of other thoughts are going to be there. It’ll be fun. And who knows? You might meet the thought that you are going to spend the rest of your life with.” All jumbled together, complete with mixers and loud music, my thoughts are having a party inside my head. And there is just no way I can get any sleep. I cannot turn my brain off.

With that complexion, I bet Lady PRADA! sleeps just fine. I envision her on a satin pillow. She has relaxed a bit now and is no longer eyeing me with suspicion from behind those sunglasses. Her PRADA! bag is neatly tucked behind her ankles, and her lap is in possession of a copy of *Better Homes and Gardens* that has been open to the same page for thirty minutes. She’s not even looking at the magazine but instead looking at the arm of the chair she was in. Maybe she was the variety of crazy where inanimate objects spoke to her. Maybe it was saying something that would cheer her up. Hopefully, it was talking her out of wearing those ridiculous sunglasses.

The doctor finally calls my name, and I am ushered into the back. I was seeing the psychiatrist today, the man who held my drug-dependency in his hands. The deal with this clinic was that if I wanted drug-therapy, I would have to submit to regular “talk therapy” as well. He grunts at me for the half-hour and sends me on my merry way. I leave buoyed by the fact that he had refilled my Xanax when I ran into the woman from the waiting room. She replaced the glasses on her face as quickly as I notice her left eye is swollen shut. Violence was written across her eyes in hues of yellow and purple that her glasses hide once again. A pamphlet falls from her hands with a title having something to do with protecting yourself from domestic abuse. I bend down to pick it up for her, and she snatches it from my grasp haughtily. She continues to walk briskly past me in a manner that suggested she didn’t want to catch whatever crazy I had. With her eye swollen shut, I hardly thought my problem was serious. Her weakness is men that beat her until her eyes wept blood. My weakness? Shiny objects.

The Good War

Ashley Glenn

The last time I saw her, she wore red;
we walked the monuments at night,
dodging tour groups by walking through
the trees, their branches hovering
above our pressed down tracks of grass.

She said it was beautiful, the lights
lowered over each state's name as she pressed
her fingers down to take a picture,
me standing awkwardly, hands perched
on my hips, waiting for her to steal my nervous smile.

While I posed, a boy splashed his fingers in the water
and patting them on the marble left
small prints to dry. I laughed
at his innocence and the way
his face tightened when he pushed his palms
against the cold marble.

She turned and faced the wall of freedom and
said nothing as she studied the stars,
her stare blank and meaningful
like a child at a funeral, knowing someone
has been lost but not knowing why.

Her toes peeked out from underneath her torn jeans;
her dyed black bangs cut cross her eyes,
blue and waiting for my smile, my sign
that I was comfortable and ready
to watch her walk away, ready to watch
the lights drop down like curtains.

Eveline's Great-Granddaughter

StefanRogenmoser

In her room Eveline packed her suitcase. She had to sit on it to zip it shut. She glanced through her window and saw a bird. She was nervous. Today, she was going to tell her father she was leaving college to live in Hollywood with a young film director she'd met and was now going steady with. Her logic was she could always finish school later if she needed to.

That morning she drove the ten miles it took to go to her nice spacey rural home for the weekend, as she did most weekends—if for no other reason than to do her laundry, her father's laundry, and to clean the family house. Her mother asked her to make sure the house was always clean and to make sure father was happy, no matter what. Every Sunday at dusk she would go to her mother's grave and place a bouquet on it and kneel down and pray. One Sunday, Eveline heard a chirping sound in the graveyard and found a bird's nest in a flowerpot near the church. She checked out a library book about birds, and last Sunday she saw some of the young Carolina Wrens leaving their nest.

Many of her friends left after they graduated from high school about two years ago: Jennifer Kingtree went to San Francisco to work as a cook in a fancy hotel and loved it; Gwen went to a New York City painting school; Kim went to Excelsior College in Albany, New York; Sara-Jean went to the University of Miami. Eveline stayed close to home and went to the Christian University of Charleston. Now, or at the end of the semester, she would leave like the others, and it was well worth the wait.

He had been directing part of his film on location in Charleston, South Carolina, for the last two months. In Greg McMurray's presence, Eveline felt vivid freedom as her spirit luxuriated at his touch, which at first sent shivers down her spine. He painted an impressionable lacquer of joy over the cynical core of beliefs which had been ingrained deeply into her since childhood. She was excited and wanted that freedom to last forever. She was enjoying herself for once. She was quite a lass, and Greg knew he could get used to her.

Eveline was slender, and her dainty legs made her a little taller than most girls. She looked as American as Bette Davis: round eyes, big forehead, and a head of short, lavish hair.

Eveline and her father were at the dinner table finishing up dessert. She usually cooked on nights like this. She had trouble discussing problems with her father because she feared he would scold all of her decisions, no matter what they were. And this was true:

"Dad, it's not every day that people in South Carolina get a chance to live in Hollywood, California."

"I know what people are like in Hollywood. They all sleep around on

each other, they're alcoholics, and they're on drugs!" her father said.

"Not all of them," Eveline replied.

"And they don't go to church, they're not religious," he said.

"What about Cecil B. DeMille?" she asked.

"Forget Cecil B. DeMille! He's dead anyway."

"Or Mel Gibson?"

"He's a racist! An anti-Semite! Now listen to your father and don't argue with me. You're just like your mother. You are exactly like your mother. I worked hard all my life so that you could have everything that you have, and now you want to leave everything behind and run off with this fellow? What about school, did you ever think about that?"

She knew she could not win this argument. She wanted to yell, "You're crazy!" but she held back, acquiesced to his will. He met Greg once and was not amused by his charm. Her father was terribly afraid of being alone, and he lost his temper at the thought of losing his daughter.

Eveline thought her father was atavistic, that his mindset belonged in the Truman or Eisenhower years. She loved her father, but most of the time hated the way he behaved. The word "no" was in the artillery of his vocabulary, and almost nothing was good enough for a "yes." She noticed he had something massively negative to say about everything she did, and she was in no mood to hear a sermon. Even though he attended the local church, money was of great interest to him. He was currently working as a mechanic specializing in European sports cars. He sometimes drank heavily, not now, although when he did Eveline suspected he might follow the dark path of drinking her mother once traveled.

"Is he financially stable?" her father asked. "Is he going to feed you, house you, provide for you?"

"Yes dad. Stop interrogating me and, just—just stop pounding me with all your questions. Don't you trust my decisions?"

"Don't question me. I'm much older than you, and I know better. Yeah, I know his type." Her father paused to think, then said, "I just want to make sure you'll be all right. I thought you knew that. I don't want to stop you or control your life—" sure seems like it she thought "—but this seems like a decision that hasn't been entirely thought out. It's half-baked."

"It is not half-baked. I mean... it's baked. I mean, I can't spend the rest of my life thinking about it or else I'll never act, and then I'll be too old, and then I'll be dead."

Her father once realized, without meaning to do so, that he sometimes felt pleasure when he made other people feel stupid. There is almost no way of explaining this psychological phenomenon. He was growing increasingly paranoid about some tramp stealing his daughter from him. She had to get as far away from her father as fast as she could.

"As long as I feed you, you do as you're told."

"Dad, I'm twenty years old for goodness sake."

"What about all that hard work you've done in school? I never even had a chance to go to college." He had almost forgotten that he'd left home when he was merely eighteen to work at an automotive manufacturing plant.

She stared silently through the window and looked at the bright stars that were like diamonds hanging—floating—in space, far beyond the reaches of the dark evening sky.

That afternoon, after she put the third load of dirty clothes in the washing machine, she vacuumed and dusted with the feather duster as usual. There was always dust, and she wondered why it even existed, perhaps just to give people something to clean, or to keep allergy doctors in business. She sneezed often, sometimes continuously for several minutes at a time. She dusted clocks and family pictures more carefully, with a paintbrush. Now that she was about to leave this life, she didn't mind it so much. Her father mowed the grass and then changed the oil on her car, afterward telling her didactically she needed it changed more often or else the motor would be ruined; her oil change wasn't due for another 1,000 miles.

One Friday after she and her friend Alice had just finished eating lunch at a downtown restaurant, they walked out onto the King Street sidewalk. Cars sped down the narrow two-lane one-way street as pedestrians ran across. A man asked if they wanted to be an extra in his film. At first they thought he was joking, but he didn't need to ask Eveline twice. Since she'd been a little girl she'd dreamed of becoming a film star, a celluloid heroine who would have to wear enormous sunglasses to reduce the glare of paparazzi camera flashes as she stepped out of a big black limousine to walk upon the red carpet.

Alice left to pick someone up from the airport. Eveline was recruited as an extra in the out of focus background who—once queued—walked casually behind the star actors. The film was called *A Time for Torture* and was about an uncivil Civil War general who got his slaves to fight with him and made sure his political enemies had slow, painful deaths because he thought they deserved it. Greg told Eveline he'd buy her a cup of coffee if she stuck around. She watched him for several hours until his day's work was done. Then they went to a café.

It was a miracle that a busy director like Greg McMurray had time to fall in love with Eveline. But it happened. His smile did the trick; it was pure Bogart—all teeth. Eveline showed him all the cool places in the city—some were used in his film. Greg told her charming stories about his previous films and the famous people he'd worked with. Greg was a few years older than Eveline, but that didn't matter. He was an independent filmmaker whose films were decent; each successive film was better and obtained a larger production budget and audience. This was his third film.

One day Eveline was reading Henry James for her English class and, tired of reading what she thought was hogwash, thrust the book toward the cinder-block wall of her dorm room; the book cracked in half at the seam and fell onto the floor in two pieces. She then pulled Albert Camus' *The Stranger* off her bookshelf and read it from start to finish in one sitting. *The Stranger* was not assigned for class, but she read it because it interested her; it also made her feel that life was pointless. Eveline thought of the stupid uncomfortable uniform she had to wear, all the formal folderol, and the professors who scoffed

at her. "Look as if you are at least remotely interested," they would tell her. She thought it was madness to put up with, and it made her feel crazy as a loon. She was ready to turn her nightmarish life into a dream. Greg would save her.

She, like many of her fellow students at the Christian University of Charleston, prayed and prayed and prayed. She asked God Almighty for an answer, or some sort of fathomable sign to help her decide what to do; be happy and be a selfish egomaniac and do what she wanted most to do, or, be modest and unhappy and honor her mother (and father) and do what mother once told her to do. The only thing close to what she thought was a sign from the Creator of the Universe was when she was walking to class one day and a white speck falling from the sky suddenly appeared on the sleeve of her dark coat. She looked up and saw a gull flying overhead; out loud she asked, "Why?" and then cursed the gull, but soon wished she hadn't, realizing the gull was made by the Creator of the Universe, as was she. What is the white crap in bird doo-doo? She took out her pocket handkerchief to remove the gull's excrement; she then threw the handkerchief into the nearest trash can. A lightning bolt of terror suddenly flashed through her brain. Escape! Escape! Escape! She had to escape.

At the airport she stood in the security check line and held Greg McMurray's hand. She was finally going to do it—escape the madness and start a new life on the West Coast. She would be married, and she and Greg would have their own place.

After they put their luggage on the carrousel, Eveline saw a teenager wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt with Icarus pulling a zeppelin out of what looked like the Grand Canyon. She never liked Led Zeppelin's music, and she thought they shouldn't have used an image of the great Hindenburg disaster as one of their album covers—but there were worse things that had happened to humanity. In high school her one and only previous boyfriend tried to convince her to like them, but she would not give in to his pleas. She just couldn't get into the music nor the lyrics about wizards and hobbits and other bilge.

Since they arrived several hours before departure, Eveline had time to think. Greg phoned his film cronies to make sure they were on time. Then Eveline and Greg sat beside one another, each wrapped in the other's arms. His touch reveled her, and her thoughts were lucid once again. They didn't talk much. Greg ate lunch at the airport café while the speakers were playing Weather Channel jazz. Eveline wasn't hungry and ate nothing. The airport café speakers now said:

*I am here in my mold
But I'm a million different people from one day to the next
I can't change my mold. . .*

She looked out the window of the terminal and saw a flock of sea-gulls fly off from the taxiway, but one gull stayed behind a few seconds longer and then flew away in the opposite direction of the flock. She wondered about the daily life of a gull, it must be dull.

She recalled her mother once saying: "Eveline. You were named

after your great-grandmother." The framed photograph of her great-grandmother on the mantelpiece. She dusted it so often and wondered what kind of person she'd been. She thought about her promise to her mother. Oh the guilt! The guilt! Who would dust now? She thought about the time when she was sixteen, and her father bought her a nice car, and now he was paying her tuition, room and board. And what about her oh so important education? She wasn't sure if she wanted to marry Greg because at this point she didn't know him well enough. Not yet—in another six months she thought she would. But she did think she loved him, and love is something that comes from God she thought. Deep down her gut told her she would get to know him much better once they were in Hollywood and lived together.

When the time came to board the jetliner, Greg tried to pull her along, gave her the Bogart smile, but she kept as still as a stoic statue. If she went with Greg she would fly 30,000 feet above the Earth: the plane would crash! He would take her into even more madness!

Her mind suddenly became clouded. Strange vibrations in her brain.

Greg tightly clutched her hands and tried once more to pull her along. He took one step into the Jetway and waved Eveline to come along. The ticket checker asked: "Are you boarding or not? You're holding up the line, young lady."

Eveline didn't want to cause a disturbance at the airport because she was afraid security might call the anti-terrorist defense squad on her. Homeland security.

"Are you boarding or not?" the ticket checker asked.

"Of course she's boarding," said Greg, who grabbed her hand, squeezed and tugged at her, and told her, "Follow your heart." But she didn't hear him. Bogart. Then he frowned and let go of her arm, and he boarded the jet.

She sat and watched as the jetliner was pushed backward away from the boarding gate by the aircraft tow tractor. She looked at the fuselage and saw Greg McMurray through one of the many small jet windows —she saw his agonized face and one of his hands pressed against the window. Greg was the only passenger looking out his window. Everyone else was reading or listening to headphones or wondering what to ask the stewardess for when she came by. Eveline knew the seat next to his was empty. What have I done? She ran to the large terminal window and waved; Greg waved back. She was wearing a pink dress and an enormous hat. As the jet taxied she ran along the window following the jet until the terminal came to an end.

She watched the jetliner thrust past the control tower and soar into the clear blue sky until it faded into a little speck. She sat back down and held back her tears. Movies would forever look different in her eyes. She did not know if she could ever go home to her father again. She looked out the big window and on the tarmac saw a parked jet which looked exactly the same as the one Greg had flown away in.

Ode to the River Mill

Andrew Ainsworth

On this lonely causeway I call a bridge,
I stand in silent observance of my life.
Dusk settles down into every hilly recess,
tucking in the embers of silhouetted peaks.
What would mountains dream of? I wonder.
Surely of a brisk next morning.
What do I dream of?

The sun runs away from here,
sooner than in most places.
Blame it on those mountains,
fencing in around this valley,
like overprotective parents.

I watch the Amanoosic bound away
in pursuit of Apollo's gleaming chariot;
both are running to a distant sea,
and an endless horizon to greet.
Can I float away with you, river,
to the open water still shining?
I feel left behind somehow.

Hearing the waterwheel behind me—
lapping the river up like a hound,
thirsty from a long day's hunt—
reminds me of my cyclic life;
time spent without retrieving any meaning,
just gulps of bitter water.

I, the weary mutt, am ever-coming
to her banks to quench my drought.
This twilight is beautifully transient,
and I am awestruck by it.

Were I wheat, I'd have the river mill
grind away my soul to dust
like the corn of elder times.
Bring me back to the root of all things,
threshing me, teaching me.
Your darkened windows
reflect the blurs of white summits
to be conquered on another day.

Alexandria

Jonathan White

Fallen asleep on pages of ancients,
Awakened, I thought myself sore lost,
For I found myself in a desert realm,
A realm deserted by all but sand.

Left and right and back I cast my glance,
Hot sand the sole catcher, but in front
A river flowed soft and cool and dark,
A man in robes on the other land.

Behind him a large gate stood, and stone
And great walls spread out to either side
And a great city beyond the walls,
Near the tail water, the earthen fan.

His arm outstretched in a great beckon,
I closed my eyes and then opened again
And stood next him for Morpheus' realm
Binds not itself to the laws of man.

The man spoke a tongue, I knew not which,
But soon he stopped his tongue and bid me
Choose whether to stay or to follow
Only by a gesture of his hand.

Not to be alone, I followed him
Through a large stone gate and down a street.
But at the halfway point he slowed gait
And with arm straight out did naught but stand.

Looking forward again now I saw
A great structure at the road's ending.
This goal must have been the man's intent,
So I moved on to fulfill his plan.

The closer I came to that great place,
The more I sensed a fiend in the air,
Still unseen but presence too well known,
For no one smelled it as I still can.

Acrid it was and pungent no less.
Drawing near to the door, I stopped short,
For I saw in the air a small ash,
And now smoke billowed up into air.

The fire was known but left to itself,
For what stops the glutton element
But a lack of that which it devours?
All must be devoured and nothing spared.

Smoke rising high and ash growing thick,
I elected to leave the damn'd place.
But as I turned a young man ran out
Covered in black from toe to his hair.

He pulled me back and bid me go in
Which offer I strongly rejected,
But at his tears and rending of clothes,
I came to know that one was still there.

I came to the door, all I could do
For the smoke and heat that came out,
But by the fire's red devilish glare
I descried a man who showed no fear.

Through the blaze and smoke I saw not much,
But what I did see I will recount:
A white haired man now black with dark soot
Saving scrolls by ladders and by chairs.

He took them from shelves as flames rose high
And piled them on the great, cool, stone floor;
For if they will survive, he surmised
They must be in that great space o'er there.

He rested not from his labour hot
Until the flames closed in around him,
And without fear he faced the glutton.
Tears cleansed the face of the young man fair.

The old man's tears should have quelled the beast
For they flowed as the river outside;
But, I think, not for his own life lost
But for the scrolls he failed to rescue.

The old man gone, the young man cried and
Shouted in his native tongue, I'm sure,
Curses that the old value, not life,
But of true value, the old man knew.

I Don't Like Cowboy Wallpaper

Erika Johnson

I knew there was something wrong even before David entered the house. Can't tell you how I knew, but I did. It was a strange feeling. The type of feeling you get when you are in the first car of a rollercoaster and look down or when you go to where your car was parked and don't see it. It's a strange, sickening, sinking feeling where you know something is just not right, but you pray it's not terribly wrong.

It was a Tuesday; an insignificant day in the series of more important days. Monday is the first day; Wednesday is the midpoint; Thursday is the day before Friday, which kicks off the weekend, and Saturday and Sunday make the weekend complete. It just seems like anything worth happening would happen on a significant day.

I was trying to put wallpaper up in my baby, London's, room. Tomorrow would be London's first birthday, and I wanted him to have cowboy wallpaper. A lot of people didn't like my celebrating London as much as I do. For things like new teeth, new sounds, more hair, less poop, or a birthday, require immediate celebration in my book. You see, I wasn't supposed to have a baby. I'm nineteen and a college freshman. I used to sing in the choir and help out at nursing homes. In high school, I made A's. People like me aren't supposed to get pregnant, with no money, no house, and no daddy for the baby. This sort of thing happens to other girls, it's supposed to, but it is definitely not supposed to happen to me. The wallpaper had cowboys dressed in blue, riding smiling horses, and herding laughing cows. Only happy things for London, only happy, smiley people and animals are allowed on London's wall. The wallpaper wasn't sticking well. I had never put wallpaper up before, and I wanted to do it quickly before Kizzy came back with London.

Kizzy was my sixteen-year-old neighbor. She and her family lived in the apartment down the hall from me and London. Kizzy's family was a happy, close family, living from paycheck to paycheck as many of the families do in the Trenton Apartments complex. They made enough money for rent, food, their one car, and other necessities the average family had. Those necessities, however, did not cover movie/mall/hang out money for a young teen. I remembered what it was like to wear the same outfits to school every week. It does something to one's ego. Anyway, I decided to pay Kizzy twenty-five dollars a week to watch London for me for an hour or so on the weekdays. She was so happy. I like it when people are happy, instead of mad at me.

I asked Kizzy to take London out of the house so I could do the wallpaper. He was starting to walk, and I didn't want him getting into the wallpaper paste. Kizzy likes to take London to the park. The park is down the block from Trenton Apartments. It's not the nicest park in the city. In fact, drug dealers will sometimes crouch at the fringes of the park if there are not too many police

around, and high school drop outs smoke near the swings with grim expressions. I don't want London near the smoke or the drugs, but I trust Kizzy. Maybe I shouldn't have.

Time flies when you are busy, so I didn't notice that it had been roughly four hours since Kizzy had taken London to the park. The wallpaper was just so difficult. I didn't pay attention to anything else until I heard David. David was my "benefits" friend. He didn't want a relationship, just to go out once and a while, and talk. "No sex" I said. I didn't want another London. He agreed, verbally. It was nice having him around, even if all he ever wanted to do was become a famous guitar player. David usually worked until eleven or twelve p.m. at his uncle's garage. I heard David coming up the steps to my floor, 3. I can't explain how I knew it was him, but I did. I heard him pound on the door.

"It's open" I said. I saw David's eyes. I knew something had happened.

"Tia" David said. "It's London."

I don't remember running down the steps to David's car. I don't remember driving to the hospital, talking to the receptionist, or calling my mom. I remember screaming for my son and trying to get past a male nurse into the OR. I remember seeing Kizzy. She was crying. Tears soaked her red face, and snot clotted her nose. She was saying something. I'm not sure what, and I know I didn't care. I believed she was somehow responsible, for what, I wasn't sure. I wanted to claw her eyes out.

David dragged me into a little room to calm me down. The room was cold. The nurse asked me for the name of my baby. "London." I said. He looked at me funny, like he didn't believe me. My parents didn't believe me at first either.

"London?" My mom asked.

"I never went to London before, and I never had a baby before. They're kinda alike." I told her.

The nurse asked me more annoying questions, writing on his clipboard like some journalist gathering facts for an important article. Kizzy came into the room, still crying, her mother and three of her five siblings in tow. Everyone was talking, talking, talking. I couldn't understand it all. It was all Greek to me.

A big man in a white coat came into the room. His face was pale and flat, with a thin line drawn above his chin that was supposed to be, I guessed, a mouth. He started talking about London, in long, complex, solemn words that didn't seem to describe London at all. His eyes had no expression. They just stared. I heard somewhere that the eyes are the windows of the soul. I thought his soul might have been on vacation.

"Ms. Jerome," the man said to me. "Your son is dead."

I changed my mind about the vacationing soul thing. He just didn't have one. I saw the world in slow motion. Kizzy's mother gasping and clutching her kids to her body. Kizzy slumping in a corner, sobbing in her hands; David's

hands reaching to hold me. The world went black.

I awoke in my parent's house, in my old room. I hadn't seen my parents since London was born. I had moved to another town, and never gave them an address. They didn't approve of London, so I left. I never called my mom, but her number was listed in my cell phone under, MOM. David called her. My mom was sitting by my bed when I woke up. She had a small Bible in her hands, and her eyes were closed. She was praying, whether it was for my soul or for London's I couldn't be sure. "Mommy" I said. She turned and looked at me. She was crying, and I cried too.

I was later told of what happened to my London. It was an accidental shooting. Two stupid teen dropouts were showing off their weapons. One went off and hit London between the eyes as he was on the swing.

I forgave Kizzy, though I know there was nothing to forgive. It was one of those things. I didn't go to the funeral. I told them to cremate London, but my intervening parents gave him a Christian burial. I guess I'm glad they did. I go to his little grave and just sit there and think. The headstone has a little angel. I know London would have loved angels; he was one.

I'm pregnant again. It's David's. I guess I should have been smarter. My dad used to tell people how smart I was and that I was going places. He doesn't anymore. I wouldn't either. I'm still in school though. I go to school at night and work during the day. I do that so I don't have to see Kizzy in the afternoons. I painted my baby's room yellow and put some circus wallpaper up. I don't like cowboys anymore. I don't see David much either. He said I changed. I guess I have. I'm good with numbers, though. My professor said I should be a financial advisor. I helped him do his taxes a few weeks ago. He says he knew some people that I could work with part time with. They like me even though I'm pregnant. They hired me part time and promised to pay for the remaining year and a half of my schooling. They want me to move to Chicago and work in their main office. I wanted to wait until after Milan was born. My baby's a boy. They said, "Fine". My parents said nothing. I didn't expect them to. My name is Tia C. Jerome. I am twenty, a junior in college, pregnant and just hired by one of the country's top business firms. I plan on moving to Chicago, and I don't like cowboy wallpaper.

Grandma

Jamie Peagler

Ten years have passed since you went away.
As a child, I believed things like cancer
Couldn't touch you. It may have destroyed your body,
But it won't destroy my memories of you.

I still remember your Friday night visits.
You'd pull into the yard in your old
Brown Buick that had a sticker of a
Green cow beside the speedometer my brother
Had given you as a tiny token of his love.

My brother and I would rush to you
Like two miniature linebackers amidst Mama's
Stern warning not to knock you down. We knew
You wouldn't fall. After all, you were Grandma.

You'd scoop us up in your arms
Smelling of Chanel No. 5 and Merit cigarettes,
Calling us "Tweety Pie" and "Doodlebug"
As you made your way inside the house.

I never have forgotten the feel of your
Wrinkled hand rubbing my forearm while
You talked to my parents about new movies,
Clinton, and the Depression.

Several years later, nothing about you had changed,
Except your Friday night visits. We were living
With you in the last months of your life to care for you
While the cancer slowly pulled you away.

You still smelled of Chanel No. 5 and Merit Cigarettes,
And you still called me Doodlebug and stroked my arm.

You did that until you didn't have any more
Strength left in your body to hold up your head.

Every now and again, I'll smell the faint smell
Of Chanel and turn my head to see your face once more.
But you are not there. You are lying under a
Marble stone that bears no testament to my memories.
Two dates and a dash are not enough to represent you.

Prayer to Sleep

Ryan Warren

Sleep to rush in and emit
Sweet forgetfulness—
The throb of today and
The hate of tomorrow.

Sleep to revisit the lost
Thoughts condensed and
Left, balancing dimly
On unstable nerve-endings.

Sleep to end this horrible
Oppression of florescence and
Empty television sets blaring
Loudly, for naught.

I ask only this;
Sleep, kill me and raise
Me, six, seven, eight hours
Hence—

I've Lived my Life in Trailers

Ashley Glenn

Spent my summers on a rusted yellow church bus,
dreaming of watching *McGee and Me* episodes
in a cool, air-conditioned building
while I slept on the dark green vinyl seats
with the white stuffing pulled out,
a grey piece of duct tape to patch the hole.
I woke, curls sticking to the side of my face,
flowery, high-waisted dress blooming in wrinkles.

I spent my Sundays on the bus-route,
the same streets,
Somerset Circle, Indian Village, Hampton Place,
houses I had memorized,
gates I had opened, pools I had plunged into,
a mind loose and running from
the sound of my mother leading children in song—
Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with—

Trailers blurred in the window;
Singlewides and doublewides smeared together, and
I leaned my face against the window,
sweat sliding down, and slept.

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The Sefer Staff:

Editor:
Ashley Glenn

Staff:

Stephanie Brigman
Danielle Crowe
Kimberle Rosinus
Lauren Schmidt
Ryan Warren

Faculty Advisor:
Dr. Scott Yarbrough

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